

Education Coordinating Council
for Dependent and Probation Youth --
The Need, Concept, Aims and Structure

A. The Poor Educational Attainment of Youth Under the Jurisdiction of our Juvenile Courts

In Los Angeles, there are a staggering number of children under the jurisdiction of the dependency court and probation systems. The educational progress of these youth is a crucial factor in ensuring that children at risk and that our County undertakes to “raise” reach their full potential.

While a quality education is a key component of every child’s successful transition to adulthood, a sound educational foundation is especially crucial for children who spend long periods of their childhood in foster care. Recent studies focusing on the problems facing our dependent youth have identified the educational needs of this population as one of the most critical areas in need of attention and collaboration. Far too many dependent youth are at risk of educational failure:

- 30% of foster youth are below grade level in ability (Elisabeth Yu, Pamela Day, and Millicent Williams, *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care, A National Collaboration* (CWLA Press, 2000));
- Over 35% of foster youth are in special education (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogin-Kaylor, and Nesmith, *FosterYouth Transitions to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care*; Child Welfare League of America 2001);
- 50% of foster children are held back in school (Weinberg, Zetlin, and Shea, *Improving Educational Prospects for Foster Youth*, 2003); and
- 46% of foster youth had not completed high school (by way of comparison, only 16% of non-foster youth fail to complete high school) (Child Welfare League of America).

Without basic educational skills and competence, these children have little chance of a successful adult life. Indeed, studies reflect that these poor educational outcomes lead to anything but a stable future. Within two to four years after emancipating from the foster care system:

- 51% of foster youth are unemployed (Child Welfare League of America);

- Close to 40% of foster youth are on public assistance or incarcerated (Courteny, Pillivan, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith, *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care*; Child Welfare League of America, 2001); and
- 40-60% of foster youth become homeless (Child Welfare League of America).

The challenges and poor outcomes are no different in relation to the educational attainment of probation youth. The most recent data from the Los Angeles County Office of Education shows that for the over 5000 youth grades 9-12 enrolled in court or community schools, the average reading level of these students is under grade level 5. Additionally, approximately 25% of these youth are receiving special education services due to a learning disability or other qualifying disability. (LACOE daily attendance reports, November 21, 2003; 2002 School Accountability Report Card; Director of Court School Special Education Local Plan Area.)

More can and should be done to address these disturbing figures and to work toward improved educational outcomes for abused and neglected youth.

B. The Need for Collaboration and Coordination

In a County with tremendous geographic breadth, there are infrequent opportunities for educators, social service workers, members of the judiciary, and advocates to meet and discuss protocols and procedures to address the education needs of dependent and probation children. Moreover, while there are numerous committees, task forces, and working groups within our community that meet to discuss the education needs of these youth, there is no centralized group that brings together and coordinates the efforts of all of these bodies.

On May 16, a first-ever gathering was held with over one hundred leaders from the child welfare, advocacy, judicial, and education communities to discuss the needs and challenges in regard to improving the education outcomes for foster youth. Featured guests and speakers included Dr. Darline Robles, Superintendent, Los Angeles County Office of Education; Los Angeles Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash; Dr. David Sanders, Director, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services; Los Angeles County Supervisors Michael Antonovich and Zev Yaroslavsky; and other judicial, community and school leaders.

The following education issues and challenges, among others, were discussed during working breakout sessions held over the course of the summit:

- Ensuring and maintaining school and placement stability;

- Access to, and transfer of, education records, crafting effective enrollment/disenrollment procedures, and challenges in calculating school credits;
- Administering and overseeing non public schools;
- Developing an academic support network for foster youth -- mentorship, tutoring and other support mechanisms; and
- Creating and implementing a foster youth literacy initiative.

(A copy of the final report from the Education Summit is attached as Exhibit 1.)

One of the themes that resonated during this incredibly well received daylong event was the critical need for – and current lack of -- coordination among the key organizations and stakeholders involved in addressing the education needs of this population. In particular, participants at the summit specifically recommended that a body be created to oversee and coordinate decisions relating to the education of foster youth. Such a coordinating and oversight group would also be invaluable in relation to the educational needs of probation youth.

C. Support for the Creation of an Education Coordinating Council

As a result of the recommendations emanating from the Summit, on August 26 the Board of Supervisors passed a motion calling for the creation of a workgroup to study and report back to the Board on the feasibility of creating an Education Coordinating Council. The Board's motion noted the current lack of a centralized group to oversee the educational needs of dependent and probation youth. Similar motions expressing support for such a coordinating body have subsequently been passed by – or are pending before – various other bodies, including the Los Angeles City Council, the Los Angeles Unified School Board of Education, and the City of Los Angeles Workforce Investment Board Youth Council (see motions attached at Exhibit 2).

In accordance with the Board's motion, a steering committee was formed under the leadership of the Children's Law Center, the Juvenile Court, the Department of Children and Family Services, and the Probation Department. Over the past three months, the group has met on multiple occasions to consider and develop the concept of an Education Coordinating Council.

The group decided that it would be helpful to convene a larger gathering of interested stakeholders to apprise them of this initiative and seek their input. On October 29th, over 80 leaders from the education, child welfare, criminal justice, judicial and advocacy community gathered together to discuss how to achieve improved collaboration and communication in regard to the educational needs of these youth. (The agenda and invitation letter from this gathering are attached as Exhibit 3.)

Numerous groups, departments, school systems and organizations attended to offer their perspectives on this issue and to opine on the usefulness of an Education Coordinating Council.

The attendees at the October 29th gathering overwhelmingly endorsed the notion of an education coordinating group and agreed in full with the view expressed at the Education Summit that there is a dire need for enhanced coordination and cooperation in regard to this area. (Notes from the October 29th gathering are attached as Exhibit 4.) As a result of this meeting, the steering committee has prepared this report memorializing the proposed contours and structure of an Education Coordinating Council. It is our hope that the Board will endorse this concept and commit to implementing its creation in the coming months.

D. Overall Concept – The Key Contours of a Coordinating Council

1. Aim

- ❑ The creation of a coordinating group to bring together the leaders of all the various groups that deal with the education needs of dependent and probation youth. This model for coordination would allow for the leveraging of ongoing work by other groups and has worked effectively in other interagency and interdisciplinary areas.
- ❑ To establish a mechanism for identifying problems and concerns in regard to a wide array of issues impacting the educational attainment of dependent and probation youth, including policies, protocols, and areas where changes in practice may be in order.
- ❑ To craft a "blue print" memorializing (a) how the educational needs of abused and neglected youth can and should be addressed; (b) the roles and responsibilities of existing agencies and departments in regard to the educational attainment of these youth; (c) what obstacles stand in the way of better educational outcomes for dependent and probation youth; and (d) a joint agenda for the Council to pursue in furtherance of, and to implement, the blue print.
- ❑ To develop joint legislative and policy initiatives.
- ❑ To have one centralized body responsible for oversight of the educational attainment of foster and probation youth.
- ❑ To develop adequate student support services and student advocates to address the unique needs of dependent and probation youth.
- ❑ To encourage the discussion of issues as they arise and before problems have festered.

- To create a clearing house for the many reports and other resources that address the education needs of abused and neglected youth, set forth recommendations for change, or describe innovative models and approaches in place in other jurisdictions.

2. Composition

The group should include the key *leaders* from the various groups and organizations involved in the education of foster youth, to ensure that policy can be set and decisions made.

The head of the following groups, or a high level designate of that leader, should sit on the Council:

- LAUSD, LACOE and representatives from the five school districts with the largest representation of foster youth
- DCFS
- The Judiciary
- Children's Law Center
- LA County Children's Commission
- LA County Probation Department
- LA County Probation Commission
- Department of Mental Health
- Children's Planning Council
- Los Angeles City Commission on Children and Families
- California Youth Connection
- LA County Public Defender
- LA County District Attorney
- Southern California Association for Philanthropy ("SCAP")
- Juvenile Court Bar Association (counsel for parents)
- First Five Commission

- Court Appointed Special Advocates (“CASA”)
- Relative caregiver representative
- Foster Youth Services
- Foster Caregiver representative

3. Mechanics

- ❑ The Council should consider within its first year (a) how to formalize its structure (whether through a joint powers agreement or some other arrangement), and (b) how to make the group financially self sufficient over time.
- ❑ The group should not be too large in number, to ensure that free flowing, frank, and productive discussions can occur.
- ❑ As issues arise, the Coordinating Council may wish to form working groups to address particular issues and report back to the larger group. The Coordinating Council should also consider whether a smaller steering or executive committee is needed to guide the group’s work.
- ❑ The group should schedule regular meetings with sufficient frequency to enable there to be a forum for discussion of issues as they arise.
- ❑ The representatives should seek input from, and serve as a vehicle for communication with, each of their constituent organizations or groups.
- ❑ The group will be created with the joint cooperation of the City, County, school, and Judicial organizations and agencies it is to include. Reports will go to all appropriate governing bodies. Moreover, it will be important to ensure that the group meets with and reports to the heads of all the governing bodies on a periodic basis (perhaps every six or twelve months).

4. Key Issues Still to Be Resolved

- ❑ Staffing of the Coordinating Council
- ❑ Start up funding